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PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

By Edward Neilan



U.S. friendship may be hazardous

When the book is written on the hazards of being a close friend of the United States, several chapters should be allotted to Pakistan.

The relationship between Washington and Islamabad has been about as bumpy as a fast ride through the Khyber Pass.

Much of the turbulence has been due to the changing moods of different administrations in Washington and to pressures by Pakistan's prominent neighbors, the Soviet Union and India.

It is the height of irony that in a year when Americans are celebrating India as never before — partly because of recent films like "Gandhi," "Passage to India" and "A Jewel in the Crown," plus a forthcoming state visit by Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi — the pressures on Pakistan from a menacing Moscow are reaching new intensity.

India has done very little to advance U.S. policies and quite a lot to frustrate them. Pakistan puts its own national interests first — most of them perceived through the lens of relations with India — but has been a steadfast ally of the United States.

There is a gnawing fear among many Americans that the United States might leave Pakistan in the lurch when the crunch comes with the Soviet Union — much in the way the United States let South Vietnam go down the drain, allowed the Republic of China to be lawyered out of protocol existence and much in the way the United States is hesitating about supporting the armed resistance in Nicaragua.

The Soviet Union's mounting intimidation of Pakistan is the latest expression of a Moscow design going back several decades. Discussions in the Soviet capital recently of the artificiality of Pakistan's borders give rebirth to Russian aims to acquire a port on the Indian Ocean.

Moscow sent a stern note to Pakistan last summer, charging it with supporting Afghan armed resistance forces and allowing supplies from the United States to flow through Pakistani territory to resistance camps.

A fortnight ago, when Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq went to Moscow to attend the funeral of the late Soviet President Konstantin Chernenko, he was criticized for aid to the Afghan resistance. According to a report by the Soviet news agency Tass, new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev charged President Zia with supporting aggression

against Afghanistan from Pakistani territory and warned that Soviet-Pakistan ties could be affected in a "most serious" way.

President Zia, not one to be intimidated, made reference to that stern warning from Mr. Gorbachev when he spoke before the new Parliament last week and renewed his pledge of support for the Afghan resistance.

The Soviet Union has punctuated its protests about Pakistani support of the Afghan resistance by launching air strikes by aircraft with Afghanistan markings. These strikes have hit targets inside Pakistani territory and these raids have been protested vigorously by Islamabad. It is widely known in the intelligence community that these planes are flown, not by pilots of the so-called Afghan air force, but by Soviet pilots.

Recently there has been speculation that the Soviet Union, under a new leader anxious to flex his muscles, may be using threats against a U.S. ally in an effort to encourage the United States to reduce its pressure on Nicaragua. Leaders, diplomats and intelligence operatives in many nations are watching to see how the United States responds, not only to the Nicaragua-Cuban-Soviet audacity in Central America but also to Soviet pressures on Pakistan.

One of the noteworthy events in U.S.-Pakistan relations was the 1971 secret flight by national security adviser Henry Kissinger from Islamabad to Peking in a Pakistani aircraft to re-establish contact with the People's Republic of China. Pakistan led with its chin in doing that favor for the United States. As a retaliation, the Soviet Union and India displayed their outrage by signing a 20-year treaty of peace, friendship and cooperation which provided for consultation in the event of a threat of aggression.

Jimmy Carter in December 1977 became the first American president to visit India without visiting Pakistan, and the snub resulted in a nose dive in the bilateral relationship. The following year, the United States suspended economic aid to Pakistan, citing the country's nuclear program.

The United States appears to be putting continual pressure on Pakistan to abandon its ambitions to develop a nuclear bomb, although the Islamabad government denies any such intentions.

How does Pakistan see its current relationship with the United States?

M.I. Butt, who holds the title of minister-information at the Embassy of Pakistan here provides an answer which wins the week's prize for diplomatic restraint: "Today, the two countries enjoy very warm relations which are free of irritants."

Edward Neilan is foreign editor of The Washington Times.